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THE UNITED STATES AND THE FOOD SUPPLY OF SWITZERLAND ¹

PAUL RITTER

Minister from Switzerland to the United States

I CAME to this conference to listen to its deliberations, and to extend a farewell to old friends and acquaintances made during my eight years of service as representative of the Helvetian Republic. But I cannot lose this opportunity of calling your attention to a matter of vital importance to my country. I have been asked in this very room if the food question was really of vital importance to Switzerland and if many of the American exports into Switzerland were really re-exported to Germany, as has frequently been stated in the American newspapers. That question gains significance when you remember that there is an embargo bill just now before Congress.

In answer, I shall take the liberty of reading into the record part of a statement which appeared some days ago in the *Journal of Commerce*, from the pen of Mr. Eugene Suter, a patriotic Swiss merchant living in New York:

The proposed amendments of the embargo section of the espionage bill portend disaster to my native country, Switzerland, as their enactment would condemn that country to starvation. It cannot be the intention of the sponsors of that bill, much less the will of this great sister republic, to bring about the destruction of an innocent, peace-loving people for the mere sake of enforcing the complete isolation of Germany.

Switzerland's very existence is dependent on her ability to trade with all belligerents. She has with great difficulty satisfied England and France of this necessity. Lengthy and repeated conferences with British and French commissions finally resulted in an understanding of this, her present position. The agreement reached with

¹ Address delivered at the National Conference on Foreign Relations of the United States, held under the auspices of the Academy of Political Science, at Long Beach, N. Y., May 30, 1917.

these countries, which has been in force since the early days of the war and which was modified from time to time to cope with new conditions, is ample proof and constitutes a full recognition by the Allies of that fundamental necessity.

The United States may have a right to demand that Switzerland stop her dealings with Germany, if she will see to it that Switzerland is supplied from here with such indispensable materials as coal and iron, neither of which the Swiss can obtain at present from anywhere else but Germany. Without these supplies Switzerland cannot exist, and as long as she must procure them from Germany she needs must furnish some of her own products, mostly milk and cheese, in exchange.

The extent of this exchange between Switzerland and Germany has been limited to a minimum, and even so, the arrangement means a great hardship to the Swiss people, as they have to sacrifice their own comforts in order to fill their most urgent requirements in raw materials. All imports and exports are closely supervised by the Swiss Import Trust, (*Société Suisse de Surveillance*), a government organization whose duty it is to see to it that the agreements with the Allies are strictly observed. Under its control practically every pound of imported merchandise is accounted for. No goods find their way into Switzerland without its sanction. And needless to say, authority is granted only upon proof of absolute necessity.

The deliberations now taking place in the Senate over this embargo bill disclose misunderstandings of Switzerland's position, and the passage of any of the proposed amendments would be nothing short of an indictment of an innocent and already severely tried people. It would deny the right of existence to a nation whose ideals resemble most those of the United States. It would seal the fate of the oldest of all republics, of the very country which has the exclusive right to the claim of parentage of democracy; it would annihilate the six-century old champion of independence and liberty.

Few people over here seem to know what the Swiss have done in the way of offering relief to war sufferers on both sides. True charity hates publicity, and it never has been said of the Swiss that they advertise such deeds. I mention this merely because I think that a better knowledge of what is actually going on in Switzerland would help to correct a wrong impression which is being created by the American press through the dissemination of reports that the Swiss republic is helping Germany, because some theorists in Washington have come to the conclusion that this must be so since that country

has become such a heavy purchaser in the American market. If Switzerland buys five times as much wheat from the United States today as before the war, it is simply because she can no longer get the other four-fifths from Russia and Rumania, as she did formerly.

Giving Switzerland a chance to present her side of the case will serve a double purpose; it will avert a great disaster and it will reinstate a friendly but misjudged country to its rightful place.

In conclusion, let me add that I have felt much at home in this assembly, not only on account of its proceedings, but also on account of the Red Cross flag draped on the walls. The Red Cross in the white field is nothing but the reversion of the national Swiss flag, the white cross in the red field. The emblem of the red cross was chosen when the society was founded in Geneva half a century ago by the Swiss citizen, Henri Dunant. For us Swiss, the Christian cross means charity, the white signifies the immaculate eternal snow on the crest of our natural mountain strongholds, and the red means the blood Switzerland has shed and will shed, if necessary, for the maintenance of that highest treasure of true democracy—liberty.